

Book Review

Kim Hyeongjun [Kim Hyung Jun] 김형준. 2018.
『히잡은 패션이다: 인도네시아 무슬림 여성의 미에 대한
생각과 실천』 [Hijab is fashion: Indonesian Muslim
women's ideas and practices of beauty]. Paju:
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More commonly known as the Islamic veil, “hijab” refers to any kind of head covering worn by Muslim women in the presence of men outside their immediate family. The hijab and its significations are at the center of political debates, especially in Western countries where the piece of cloth is often seen and criticized as a symbol of female oppression. Against popular notions that reduce the hijab to a sign of patriarchal subjugation, some Muslim women as well as scholars have tried to provide alternative perspectives based on the experiences of veiled women themselves—that wearing the hijab is more than a passive choice reflecting women’s subservience to patriarchy.

Hijab is fashion by Kim Hyeongjun falls along this line of thought, as the author argues against simplistic notions that equate hijab with female oppression and provides an emic perspective that reflects the thoughts and experiences of Muslim women themselves. Based on anthropological fieldwork in Indonesia—where 87 percent of the population is Muslim—Kim provides a holistic analysis of the aesthetic practices of young Javanese

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women pertaining to their choices of veiling and unveiling. By introducing the diverse interpretations of Islamic doctrine, he breaks down the singular concept of “Muslim women” or “Muslim” that is frequently imagined as a homogenous group.

Divided into seven chapters, this book examines the hijab through the lenses of Islamic doctrines, local history, and ethnographic cases. The first chapter introduces the meanings of the hijab across history, illustrating how the garment was politicized in colonial and postcolonial Islamic context. The second chapter focuses on the Koran and different interpretations of its verses to argue that the hijab and female aesthetic expression are open to competing interpretations. Chapter three traces the history of the hijab in Indonesia, focusing on traditional beauty ideals, the hijab controversy during the country’s Islamization, and the popularization of hijab in the 2000s. Competing opinions of Muslim fundamentalists, liberals, and other groups are introduced. Kim argues that hijab controversy has affected, and was affected by, the general attitude of seeing women’s dress as a matter of individual choice, and that Islam coexists with fashion and modernity in the aesthetic practices of Indonesian Muslim women.

In the next chapters, Kim explores the complexity of hijab-wearing in twenty-first-century Indonesia through specific cases. Chapters four and five focus on the neologisms *hijaber* and *jilboobs* respectively. *Hijaber* is what Muslim women who wear the hijab as a fashion item call themselves, and Kim analyzes their activities and discourses to show that the *hijaber* community creates a hybrid form of modernity in which religious pursuits, consumerist desires, and aesthetic aspirations coexist. Their strategic simplification of Islamic doctrine and emphasis on one’s intention over appearance create a niche in which women maintain the freedom of aesthetic expression under the growing influence of Islam. On the other hand, *jilboobs* is a derogatory name coined by men to criticize and sexually objectify women who wear both the hijab and revealing clothes. Quoting Michel Foucault, the author illustrates how the naming legitimizes patriarchal control over the way Muslim women dress and how it causes a dilemma on the *hijabers*’ part as they actively try to differentiate themselves from *jilboobs* to avoid criticism. Chapter six analyzes the cases of two interviewees who chose to wear or take off the *cadar*—a form of head covering that only reveals the eyes. It is revealed that nonreligious factors, such as a desire for *nyaman* (peace of mind), played a huge role in the women’s choices, which supports Kim’s argument that Muslim women’s

choices of veiling or unveiling should not be reduced to a drastic ideological change nor a lack of agency on the women's part. The last chapter wraps up the discussion by exploring the diverse meanings of wearing or not wearing the hijab, with the author arguing for a situational analysis of the topic. Kim argues that the choice of wearing a hijab cannot and should not be equated with a specific attitude towards aesthetic expression, and that one should abstain from distorting real-life experiences of Muslim women based on stereotypes.

Written for a general audience, *Hijab is fashion* is easy to follow and interesting to read. Rich ethnographic data and color images vividly convey the author's arguments. The concise theoretical discussion, however, may come across as insufficient to academic researchers. The lack of literature review gives the impression that former studies on the hijab have mostly reproduced assumptions that the author challenges, as it is hard to distinguish between the author's original arguments and the arguments that have already been made. There are also certain parts in which analyses seem incomplete, leaving the reader with lingering questions. The pursuit of harmony and balance, for instance, could have been elaborated and given more context than the briefly suggested "cultural characteristic of Indonesia" (282). I would have also appreciated further analysis on how the strategic embracement of Islamic doctrines as "respecting" or "protecting" women stands on precarious grounds, as the same logic could lead to victim-blaming in cases of sexual assault. While the case works nicely for the discussion of dependence and autonomy, the ramifications of embracing such discourses could have been further explored.

The biggest limitation of the book—one the author cannot be faulted for—is the author's position as an older male researcher. As Kim admits in the epilogue, he has never had the experience of paying attention to his own aesthetic expression. Gendered distribution of beauty pressure is characteristic of South Korea, so as a middle-aged Korean man, it is possible that Kim missed certain signs or information that a younger female researcher would have probed deeper. I feel that one missed opportunity was when his interviewee likened the hijab to the brassiere—a comparison at which Kim was "very astonished" and "did not know how to continue the conversation" due to the mention of female underwear (8). To someone experienced in wearing a bra, the analogy hits home and sparks dozens of extra questions. The researcher's gender may have also resulted in self-censorship by the interviewees, especially more so since many of

them were introduced or accompanied by local male acquaintances. The researcher's low access to the private sphere of his research targets and their "girl talk" makes me wonder if there could be another side of the story—one that young Muslim women were hesitant to reveal to an older male researcher from South Korea. These limitations, in turn, point to further research that other scholars interested in the topic can work on.

Overall, *Hijab is fashion* does an excellent job of overviewing the historical, political, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of the hijab in Indonesia. The author not only brings in diverse voices and perspectives pertaining to Muslim female aesthetic expression but also provides a balanced perspective on Islamic culture itself. A wide range of readers may find this book appealing, including those interested in hijab controversies, those interested in Muslim women and Islam, and those interested in fashion and aesthetic practices in general. I also recommend the book to those concerned about gendered aesthetic expression and feminism, as the book provides a chance to reflect on our own society and leaves much to ponder about.